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Dickens's 'school of affliction': Learning from Death in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*

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Abstract

This essay reads death scenes in Dickens's early novels as contributions to a wider reformist drive (evidenced in discourses of burial, urban, and sanitary reform) to clean up the nation's ways of thinking about mortality, each of which relied upon the careful policing of sense-data surrounding corpses, graves, and deathbeds. In doing so, it seeks to expand our sense of why Dickens adopted a sentimental mode in both *Nicholas Nickleby* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, arguing that it derived not just from a desire to provoke emotional responses in readers, but spoke to his interest in association psychology as the mechanism by which both ideas, and minds, were constructed. It thus argues for Dickens's deathbeds scenes as sites of literary experiment: attempts to recruit narrative fiction's affective and psychological power for the causes of aesthetic and social transformation.

Keywords: Smike; Little Nell; Sentimentalism; Associationism; Victorian psychology; graveyards; cemeteries; grief

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We are used to thinking about Dickens's early death scenes as a means of establishing the aesthetic and cultural differences between contiguous generations. The death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1) has long served as a metonym for mid-nineteenth century literary sentimentalism as a whole: a literary mode against which subsequent generations of readers and critics have repeatedly sought to measure their own superior aesthetic sophistication. Oscar Wilde's oft-quoted conversational quip that one needs a heart of stone not to laugh at Nell's death helped distance his generation of Aesthetes from their mid-century predecessors, and Aldous Huxley's judgement ('it is distressing in its ineptitude and vulgar sentimentality') signalled a fundamental difference between nineteenth and twentieth-century literary sensibilities (Huxley 57). These and similar criticisms show how late-nineteenth and twentieth-century readers identified a self-defining otherness not only in the sentimentality of these textual deaths, but also in the familiar accounts of rigid Victorian patriarchs rendered helpless by tears upon encountering them. Yet while these scenes have repeatedly been read as signals of aesthetic difference it is less often noted that they also marked a rupture between an earlier mode of representing death and something that was meant to be wholly new. This essay seeks to establish that the deaths of Smike and Little Nell were also experimental, emerging from Dickens's attempt to allow contemporary psychological theories of idea-formation to shape his literary representation of death.

Dickens linked the mode in which he writes about death to his own devastating encounter with grief in a speech he made in Edinburgh in 1841: 'Not untried in the school of affliction, in the death of those we love, I thought what a good thing it would be if in my little work of pleasant amusement I could substitute a garland of fresh flowers for the sculptured horrors that disgrace the tomb' (Dickens 'Banquet in His Honour: Edinburgh', 10). The notion that affliction is a trial to be endured has profound biblical resonances – both Job and various Psalmists describe it in this way – but here, as elsewhere in his discussions of death and grief,

Dickens combines conventionally religious language and imagery with contemporary (and largely secular) notions of individual and social progress. In naming affliction as a ‘school’, Dickens not only associates it with improvement but also positions himself as a graduate whose education in the processes of death, grief, and recovery have qualified him for a specific literary task: to compose an aesthetically ‘fresh’ form of writing about death, with which he can communicate to a mass readership the lessons that affliction had taught. Both the ‘sculptured horrors’, which Dickens refers to the traditional grave decorations associated with the *memento mori* tradition, such as winged skulls, and crossed bones, and the delicately woven ‘garland’, represent radically different cultural responses to death. Neither is naturally occurring, each is fashioned by an artist’s hand; Dickens claims that his intention was to swap one aesthetic approach for the other, the old for the new, the horrific for the fresh.

Critics are divided on how seriously we should take the claims Dickens makes in his Edinburgh speech. The editors of his letters suggest that it should be read as ‘an instance of CD’s overestimating the impact of Nell’s death on the general public’ (Dickens 2: 311) while Robert Patten dismisses the claims as merely ‘formulaic’ (Patten 301). Others are more inclined to take Dickens at his word; Sarah Winter argues that he intended to position his novel ‘as a means to reform Victorian mourning’ (Winter 207), while Claire Wood identifies his impulse to use death ‘to impart moral wisdom’ (Wood 74). John Bowen finds evidence, both in the speech and in the novel itself, of a desire to practice ‘a different form of mourning and writing, that is not inert and monumental, but perennially fresh and new....it is only this frail garland that can take the place of, and thus take us away from, the intense loathing and fear that death and its monuments produce’ (Bowen 2).

I, too, see a radical intent behind Dickens’s speech, and wish to take seriously his claim that in the emotional climax of *The Old Curiosity Shop* – and, in my reading, the denouement of his previous novel *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9) – he sought to write a newly psychologised

type of death scene: one that deliberately sought to disassociate the representation of death from the feelings of terror, horror, and fear to which it had typically, and damagingly, been linked. To compare the deaths in *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) – Nancy’s brutal murder, Sikes’s hanging, or the appalling death of the pauper woman in Chapter 5 – with the gentle passing of Smike and Nell, compels us both to acknowledge the range and variety of Dickens’s early death scenes, and to confess his ability to elicit shock by recounting death in realist detail. “‘She couldn’t even see her children’s faces, though we heard her gasping out their names’”, the pauper’s grieving husband recalls (42), in just one of the many unsettling moments that Dickens evokes with apparent ease. Why, then, did he choose not to do this with Smike and Nell?

This essay reads Dickens’s early death scenes as attempts to disseminate the psychological lessons that he learned in the ‘school of affliction’. It considers how his desire to participate in a new Victorian death culture that he had encountered during his grief relates to a wider reformist drive – evidenced elsewhere in discourses of burial, urban, and sanitary reform – to clean up the nation’s ways of thinking about mortality. In doing so, it repositions the self-evident (and much criticised) sentimentalism of these early death scenes as an aesthetic mode whose roots lay in psychological theorisations of the processes of idea-formation, and the effect of cultural texts on both individual subjectivity and social progress. When viewed in this way, it becomes clear that Dickens’s sentimental deaths should be read not as embarrassing failures of literary nerve by a writer who was unequal to the stern task of depicting mortality with fidelity, but rather as sites of literary experiment in which he sought to apply to fiction the psychological principles that had informed the construction of garden cemeteries, and that positioned cultural representations of death as a means of effecting social change.

Disassociating death from horror

Dickens based his belief in death's instructive potential upon his own traumatic experience of loss following the sudden death of Mary Hogarth, his wife Catherine's seventeen-year old sister. He sets out his thinking in a letter to the Rev. Robert Cassie Waterston, written shortly after arriving in the United States in 1842, in which he again makes clear the connection between this real-life tragedy and his fictional account of Nell's death:

I will not tell you how sorely I was tried, four years ago last May, by this bereavement—nor how dearly I loved her; my constant affectionate, and chosen companion—nor in what respects I hope this sorrow has gradually made me a better man—nor how I have learnt to look beyond the Grave—and tried, in one of my stories, to divest it of some of its terrors. (Dickens 3: 52-3)

Couching a sequence of confessions (about 'how sorely I was tried [...] how dearly I loved her [...] in what respects this sorrow has made me a better man') in the form of repeated denials ('I will not tell [...] nor how [...] nor in what respects'), Dickens tells Waterston that he will withhold this information while simultaneously leaving him in no doubt about its import. His syntax allows us to track with precision the progress of his thoughts as they travel forward in time from the events of May 1837 to those of the publication of Nell's death in 1841, betraying the associationist logic that connects them. Each successive clause is coupled to the next by a dash that links – like coupling hooks – each discrete idea into a completed train of thought, beginning and ending with a death: the former traumatically factual, the latter cathartically – and perhaps even redemptively – fictional. Between these two bookending deaths, Dickens sketches a brief, developmental narrative of education, moral improvement, and individual progress, all grounded on the authority of a personal experience which, he claims, has made him 'better'.

Dickens repeatedly claims that his education into death has engendered a desire to

strip the most common symbols of mortality ('the grave' and 'the tomb') of literary associations with 'horror' or 'terror' that stretched back at least as far as to the middle of the previous century. It was the speaker of Robert Blair's 'The Grave', who first declared that to 'paint the gloomy horrors of the tomb' (Blair 5) was a suitable literary task. His successors in what later became known as the 'graveyard school' of poetry followed suit enthusiastically, and helped establish the tradition of sepulchral moralising from which Dickens now sought to depart.¹ For Dickens, however, the tomb's horrors were both material and literary, and if we consider his deployment of grave imagery in the context of wider concerns about the psychological effects of the nation's overcrowded urban burial grounds in the 1830s and 1840s, it becomes clear that Dickens saw a causal relationship between the aesthetics of burial, as practised in graveyards and represented in fiction, and death's psychological hold over the minds of the living.

Despite the gloomy inheritance of graveyard poems such as Blair's, the habit of writing about death as an object of horror was associated less with gothic than with religious – and specifically Evangelical – literature by the mid-nineteenth century. The dead 'often fail to signify in any crudely Gothic way' (Smith 2) in the Victorian period, and Gothic writing about death increasingly eschewed horrific effects in favour of more complex engagements with ideas about life and creativity. Religious and moralistic texts, however, regularly sought to invoke a fear of death, and the judgement to come, as a means of terrifying readers into repentance (Jalland 19-38). Dickens details his dislike of this tactic in an 1839 letter to Mrs Godfrey, an aspiring children's writer who had sent him a collection of stories written in this morally didactic style. 'I object decidedly to endeavouring to impress [children] with a fear of death, before they can be rationally supposed to become accountable creatures', he writes, before asserting that deploying fear as a pedagogical tool has profound social consequences: 'I do declare to you, my dear Madam, that I daily see such evil and misery springing up from

this fatal mistake, that whenever I see the slightest approach to it, I cannot in my conscience let it go by without my most solemn protest' (Dickens 1: 567-8). It is unclear whether Dickens's 'daily' exposures to this 'fatal mistake' were occurring in the streets, or among family and friends, but it seems likely that he had first-hand experience of the intensity with which affective narratives can shape young minds. One article, narrated in his *Uncommercial Traveller* persona, recounts how stories heard in childhood provoked a series of 'nightmares and perspirations' and remained 'alarmingly real' to the narrator's young mind long after hearing them (Dickens 'Nurse's Stories', 176; 173). Dickens's apparent disapproval of frightening stories is complicated by the evident relish with which he recounts not only this childhood terror and the narratives that provoked it, but innumerable other grotesque and macabre narratives throughout his fictional career. There are deaths in both of the novels discussed in this essay that are more horrifying than sentimental, and which complicate Dickens's apparent rejection of death's exploitation for moral purposes; there is little about the drowning of Daniel Quilp, or Ralph Nickleby's suicide, that could be woven into an aesthetically attractive garland. Here, and not for the first time, we find Dickens only practising what he preaches when it suits his own purposes.

He does, at least, explain his belief that such a powerfully affective resource should be used with care, as he implies his belief in the unique susceptibility of young minds to intensely affective sensory experiences. His suggestion that a fear of death can be 'impress[ed]' upon a child draws upon a long-established trope that figures the mind as a surface that can be stamped, and which is therefore susceptible to inscription by external agents. Children, who have accumulated less knowledge of the world and are less able to rationalise their responses to their sensory encounters with the world around them, are proportionately more susceptible to receiving and storing such impressions than adults. Impressing a fear of death on the mind of a child, Dickens suggests, is thus a means of

perpetuating ‘evil and misery’, and passing it on from one generation to the next.

This way of understanding the mind’s interaction with sense data derives from John Locke’s theories of psychological formation in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), and had become commonplace by the mid-nineteenth century. Locke denies that humans have ‘native ideas...stamped upon their minds in their very first characters’ and argues that our ideas are the result of ‘impression from sensation or reflection’ (Locke 13; 75). Locke’s trope first challenged, and then largely supplanted, a previously dominant metaphor that figured innate knowledge as having been ‘written’ onto the mind by God. It develops Locke’s theory that ‘all our ideas derive from “Experience”—that sense perception and reflection alone stamp and furnish us with impressions’ (Pasanek 143).

That Dickens was still reliant upon Locke’s metaphor in the mid nineteenth century testifies to its enduring significance. Indeed, Locke laid the foundations for the most influential psychological theory of Dickens’s lifetime: the association of ideas. Developed by figures such as David Hartley, David Hume, Dugald Stewart, James and John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer and Alexander Bain, associationism was ‘perhaps the closest thing Victorian psychology had to an orthodoxy’ (Dames 94). Theories that relied upon the association of ideas as a mechanism for self-formation expanded upon Locke’s belief that the mind was susceptible to impressions received through sensory encounters with the surrounding world, which were processed and stored as ideas before forming into what Locke famously called trains of thought, which could emerge unbidden and with surprising force. The best-remembered nineteenth-century proponents of these theories are connected to the Associationist School of David Hartley and James Mill, but the faculty psychology of Dugald Stewart and Thomas Reid, which also relied upon the association of ideas but allowed a greater role for orthodox religious belief, probably had greater influence on Dickens and the culture in which he wrote (Stolte 59). Sharp differences may have emerged between these

rival theories over, for example, the degree of innatism (if any) in children, or the precise nature of the relationship between bodily and mental processes, but they shared a common origin in Locke's central idea, which had been so widely accepted that they had become the primary theory of mental formation and activity by the 1830s.

Associationist theories played a significant but under-studied role in Victorian death culture. Anxieties of bodily, rather than mental, susceptibility have tended to predominate in critical discussions of the various burial reform movements that flourished in Britain in the 1830s and 1840s. Yet associationism's common-sense status ensured that fears about psychological damage were widespread both in critiques of overcrowded urban burial grounds, and in optimistic depictions of how reformed cemetery spaces might effect social change. They underpin the analysis of sanitary reformer and bureaucrat Edwin Chadwick's influential *Supplementary Report on the Practice of Interment in Towns* (1843), which exhaustively details the horrors of London's graveyards. Chadwick's associationism leads him to claim that the 'images presented to the mind by the visible arrangements for sepulture, are inseparably associated with the ideas of death itself to the greater proportion of the population', and that such neglected or mismanaged burial grounds 'superadd to the indefinite terrors of dissolution [...] associations of desecration and insult' (Chadwick 142). These terrors ensure that 'the crowded state of the places of burial' ought to be considered not only as a threat to physical health, but also to mental wellbeing: just as effluvia from buried dead bodies infects the city's waterways, so too does the sight of unkempt cemeteries 'pollute the mental associations [...] of the population' (195). John Strang, a guiding force behind the construction of a garden cemetery in Glasgow, adopts similarly psychologised language to describe how crypt burial produces an idea of physical dissolution which 'forcibly presses itself on the mind', because 'the only associations' we have with death 'are such as the imagination shrinks from contemplating' (Strang *Germany*, 30). John Claudius Loudon,

perhaps the most influential cemetery designer of the mid-Victorian period, acknowledges that urban burial grounds are ‘shunned and avoided’ because ‘the associations which are generally attached’ to them are ‘gloomy and terrific’ (Loudon 8).

Like many other burial reformers of the time, Chadwick, Strang, and Loudon all believed that better management and design of burial grounds, in places far-removed from the daily lives of town-dwellers, would help shield the young from what Chadwick refers to as the ‘painful associations and visible images of the changes wrought in death’, which ‘haunt the imagination in after-life’ (44). Each predicts that a failure to transform the material conditions of burial has already had severe moral and social consequences, and that these will only worsen as Britain’s urban population continues to expand. Dickens’s desire to dissociate horror from the grave was thus far from being an idiosyncrasy in the 1830s, but was widely shared by those who saw the application of associationist psychology to the question of burial reform as a means of accelerating personal, social, and national progress.

Dickens, too, was convinced by the claims of association psychology. Tyson Stolte and Sarah Winter are among those who have recently built upon Michael S. Kearns’s observation that the most far-reaching aspects of Dickens’s interest in the human mind can be found not in his investigations into abnormal or sensational psychological states—such as mesmerism, or monomania—but in his sustained representation of associationism, ‘his era’s generally accepted explanation of the life of the mind’ (Kearns 111). Both his warnings against the didactic exploitation of fear in children’s literature, and his desire to ‘divest [the grave] of some its terrors’ in his own writing, testify to the associationist principles that influenced his belief that attitudes to death could be shaped both individually and culturally by reforming death’s fictional representation. The emphasis that advocates of garden cemeteries placed upon the need to avoid generating feelings of revulsion recalls Dickens’s ambition for Little Nell’s death scene; like them, he sought to represent death in new ways, whose novelty can

be perceived in a desire to make the grave more attractive.

Practical attempts to reform the nation's burial practices, by making burial grounds more aesthetically pleasing, were already underway by the time of Mary Hogarth's death. Concerns about overcrowded graveyards had led to the construction of the first wave of new 'garden' cemeteries in the 1830s: vast burial grounds on the outskirts of towns and cities, which were run as commercial concerns and which promoted an aestheticization of death through the careful superintendence of the cemetery's visual appearance. These were anything but utilitarian spaces, but were 'magical spots [...] where a reticent people [...] poured out their feelings into the selection of sites, botanical embellishments, and unstinting architectural and sculptural ornamentation' (Curl *Victorian Celebration*, 268).ⁱⁱ One such space had formed the backdrop to Dickens's mourning for Mary Hogarth, who was buried in the new cemetery at Kensal Green. Its landscaped acres had been designed as a place in which the living would want to spend time surrounded by the tombs and graves of the dead. A guidebook to the cemetery, published a few years after Hogarth's interment, gives some idea of how this ersatz pastoral space was being marketed:

The Cemetery at Kensal Green, adorned as it is with such a goodly variety of beautiful flowers, and freshest evergreens, presents a smiling countenance as well amidst the gloomy winter as in the sunny days of blooming summer, and, unlike the desolate, pent-up burial grounds of the crowded metropolis, instead of repelling our approach but when positive duty commands, allures us to enter its sacred precincts, both by the floral charms within, and the view afforded thence of the extensive and pleasing surrounding scenery without. There is nothing to revolt the feelings; no profane hand scatters the ashes of the dead (Clark x).

The cemetery's 'charms' are apprehended visually, and the visual field is carefully managed

to exclude anything that might repel potential visitors and thereby establishing harmful associations. Dickens's formative experiences of burial, and of the grave as a locus of intense affective significance, were thus made in what was a radically new and experimental space: one that was both democratically open and commercially oriented, modern in its design and nostalgic in its appeal to the enduring cultural archetype of the rural burial. More significantly, it was a space whose purpose was understood to be at least partly psychological, transforming long-standing attitudes to death by beautifying both the grave and its surroundings, and thereby controlling its associative significance.

Dickens evidently felt the 'allure' noted by the handbook in the immediate aftermath of Mary's death. His letters reveal his focus on Mary's grave: seeking to beautify it at recurring intervals, composing an epitaph for its stone ('Young, beautiful, and good, God numbered her among his angels at the early age of seventeen') that would later echo through his fiction, and making arrangements for his own body to be buried in an adjacent plot.ⁱⁱⁱ In June 1837, just one month after Mary's death, he wrote that he 'saw her grave but a few days ago, and the grass around it was as green and the flowers as bright, as if nothing of the earth in which they grew could ever wither or fade' (Dickens 1: 268). In the spring of the following year, he asked Harrison Ainsworth, who lived in Kensal Green, whether he might 'speak to the gardener at the Cemetery for me' and request that he would 'plant a rose tree or a few little flowers on that early grave' for some fee (Dickens 1: 390). His request would not have been unusual; in its early years, the cemetery employed teams of people whose principal task was the maintenance and beautification of the burial ground (Curl *Kensal Green*, 103). Almost twenty years earlier, Washington Irving had noted that the 'custom of decorating graves' with flowers had all but vanished from English life, and was 'now only to be met with in the most distant retired places of the kingdom, where fashion and innovation have not been able to throng in, and trample out all the curious and interesting traces of the olden time' (109). The

desire to make gravesites less horrific had revived this custom, and Dickens's request to the cemetery's gardeners signals his participation in a reformed, and progressive, aesthetic of memorialisation.

The similarity between Dickens's fictional project and this reformist project is instructive, but has largely gone unnoticed, yet both share a keen sense of death's subject-shaping power, and a belief in the psychological process through which this shaping occurred. In the rest of this essay, I want to show what Dickens learned from his experience of mourning in the reformed and reforming space of Kensal Green, which so rigorously sought to exclude the pain of death, and to promote a placid, aestheticized vision of mortality, and how he translated his lessons into his fictional representation of death.

Writing Death as a Garland

Dickens's desire to shield his readers from horrifying textual representations of death should be understood as an attempt to bring fictional deaths into line with the changes that were being proposed – and put into action – by burial reformers. We can see what this means in practice by considering Smike's final illness in *Nicholas Nickleby*, where Dickens figures death's approach as something familiar, non-threatening, and even desirable. The novel's serial publication coincided with a campaign to publicise and reform the terrible conditions of London's burial grounds, which was beginning to attract public attention through accounts such as those provided by George Frederick Carden, founder of the cemetery at Kensal Green, and sanitary reformer G. A. Walker.^{iv} Dickens clearly knew of the growing clamour; his most famous description of the horrors to be found in some London burial grounds was written much later in *Bleak House* (1852-53) (where he describes the 'hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene' (180) in which Nemo is buried), but *Nicholas Nickleby* contains a similar description of 'a dismal place raised a few feet above the level of the street' by the accumulated bodies below the soil:

a rank, unwholesome rotten spot, where the very grass and weeds seemed, in their frowsy growth, to tell that they had sprung from pauper's bodies, and struck their roots in the graves of men, sodden in steaming courts and drunken hungry dens. And here in truth they lay parted from the living by a little earth and a board or two—lay thick and close, corrupting in body as they had in mind; a dense and squalid crowd (750).

In both novels, Dickens emphasises the repulsive aesthetics of urban burial and the unsettling proximity of dead flesh to the homes of the living. Solace, for mourners, was impossible to find in such repellent spaces, whereas horror and terror were too readily apparent; not only the bodies, but also the minds of those who lived in close proximity to the dead were thus at risk of infection.

Associationist psychological theories posited that exposure to such repulsive spaces could have profound effects on the mind, and Dickens illustrates how this influence might work by detailing the mental processes that afflict Ralph Nickleby, for whom the sight of this 'poor, mean burial-ground' (750) initiates a train of thought that leads ultimately to his suicide. Dickens shows how the sight of the burial ground makes Nickleby think of a local suicide who had been buried here, and then continues to trace out the associative links between the things Ralph sees and the ways in which he thinks. The burial ground makes him think of the suicide; a passing drunk makes him laugh, which recalls to mind further details about the case; and then 'the heap of graves' conjures up 'a strong and vivid idea of the man himself' in Ralph's susceptible mind. We are told, in a significantly Lockean phrase, that Ralph 'carried the impression' (750) of this suicide with him when he left the graveyard, and that later that night he would hang himself. Nickleby had multiple reasons for wishing himself harm: the collapse of his business, the failure of his attempt to best Nicholas, the discovery

that he had unwittingly persecuted his son – the unfortunate Smike – to his early death.

However, it is not until ‘he passed here’, and ‘looked eagerly in’ (750) that the topic of suicide enters his mind.

This contrasts sharply with Dickens’s description of Smike’s death and burial, which has taken place just three chapters earlier. Given the increasing public concern over London’s burial grounds, and Dickens’s desire to depict death more gently, it is significant that Smike dies and is buried in the countryside rather than near his London home. Here, too, Dickens uses associationist language, pointing out that the Devon countryside to which Smike has been moved for his health was full ‘of old associations’ (711) for Nicholas. As Nicholas recounts to his dying friend the happy memories that these associations throw up, Smike uses these benign encounters with a terror-free graveyard to construct psychologically beneficial associations between death, burial, family, and love. He learns how Nicholas and Kate “‘used to loiter”’ beneath a particular churchyard tree, “‘before we knew what death was, and when we little thought whose ashes would rest beneath”’. He hears how they would ‘sit down to rest and speak’, and how Kate had once fallen ‘fast asleep under that tree’ (712), and how their father had subsequently decided to be buried on the very spot where his daughter had slept. Eventually Smike, too, decides that he wishes to be buried there. As Helena Michie points out, ‘In this rural idyll...Smike relives a past that is not his own’ (Michie 140); in doing so, he begins to establish and share some of the happy associations that Nicholas and his family have for the churchyard, which help to beautify the idea of burial.

This removal to a rural idyll seems to be a central aspect of Dickens’s attempt to detoxify death’s fictional representation, as it is one that he replicates in *The Old Curiosity Shop*:

Some young children sported among the tombs, and hid from each other, with laughing faces. They had an infant with them, and had laid

it down asleep upon a child's grave, in a little bed of leaves. It was a new grave—the resting place, perhaps, of some little creature who, meek and patient in its illness, had often sat and watched them, and now seemed to their minds scarcely changed. (396-7)^v

These sentimental vignettes emphasise transmortal continuity, the absence of suffering, and the children's conviction that graves were not sites to be feared, but could be accepted into the fabric and routines of everyday life.

Nell's death – or rather, its aftermath, as that is all the reader is shown – is also characterised by calm, peace, and beauty: anything, in fact, that might ward off any suggestion that the death of a teenager from a wasting disease was in any way horrific. Nell dies while the narrator's attention is focused elsewhere; we last see her alive in Chapter 55, gazing through her window and looking forward to Spring, before Dickens averts his narrative gaze for as she sickens, declines, and eventually dies. The narrative only returns to her in Chapter 71, when her friends arrive to bring her back to the city only to find that they, and the reader, have arrived too late. The passage in which her death is confirmed has repeatedly been identified as an example of Dickens's inability to write about death with artistry:

She was dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death. Her couch was dressed with here and there some winter berries and green leaves, gathered in a spot she had been used to favour. "When I die, put near me something that has loved the light, and had the sky above it always." Those were her words.

She was dead. Dear, gentle, patient, noble Nell was dead. Her little bird — a poor

slight thing the pressure of a finger would have crushed — was stirring nimbly in its cage; and the strong heart of its child-mistress was mute and motionless for ever.

Where were the traces of her early cares, her sufferings, and fatigues? All gone.

Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but peace and perfect happiness were born; imaged in her tranquil beauty and profound repose (537-8).

Dickens's presentation of Nell's corpse as an inert object of display is reinforced by an accompanying image in which the novel's illustrator George Cattermole depicts Nell lying on her deathbed.

[Insert image here]

Figure 1 'At Rest (The Death of Little Nell)'. (Source: Charles Dickens, "The Old Curiosity Shop in Master Humphrey's Clock," ourheritage.ac.nz | OUR Heritage, accessed June 25, 2019, <http://otago.ourheritage.ac.nz/items/show/7135>).

Cattermole had received detailed notes from Dickens on the picture's composition in a letter of the 22 December 1840:

It is winter time, so there are no flowers; but upon her breast, and pillow, and about her bed, there may be slips of holly, and berries, and such free green things. — Window overgrown with ivy—. The little boy who had that talk with her about angels, *may* be by the bedside, if you like it so, but I think it will be quieter and more peaceful if she is quite alone. I want it to express the most beautiful repose and tranquillity, and to have something of a happy look, if death can (Dickens 2: 172).

Dickens makes it sound as if Nell, surrounded by evergreens, will be pictured as something that has been reabsorbed into a natural order that both precedes and outlasts her. In practice, however, it is the realm of culture rather than nature that predominates in Cattermole's image; the holly and ivy stipulated by Dickens are clearly visible on her breast and in the

window, but are visually overwhelmed by the ornate carving of Madonna and child on the headboard of the bed on which she lies, the gothic tracteries of an opened window that seems to beckon her soul to heaven, the Bible upon which her hand rests and the enormous hourglass that is prominently displayed upon the window-sill, each of which attracts the viewer's attention with greater insistency.

Highlighting this overdetermined visual field, which she describes as 'a muddle', Jessica Straley identifies pairs of contrasting sensations that Dickens's readers 'are invited to feel, all at once', and which as a consequence legitimise both our 'sentimentality and ridicule'. These responses quite rightly include 'buoyancy and solidity, relief and anguish, justice and injury...transcendence and decay' but, more problematically, we find among this list of opposites 'beauty and horror' (Straley 185): a binary made up of one term that Dickens certainly hoped his readers might locate in the image, and another that he sought resolutely to exclude. Straley's point may be that this young woman's death is *de facto* horrific, but this runs counter to the logic of associationism, which holds that death only horrifies if it summons up horrific associations that have been established by earlier, terrifying encounters with death.

His desire to stop such associations from forming registers most clearly in his language during the chapters in which Nell's death is retrospectively described. A distinct cluster of horror-denying terms can be found as he narrates the arrival of Kit and friends to the village, their reception by Nell's distracted grandfather, and their eventual realisation that Nell has died. The passage announcing her death is studded with reassuring adjectives: terms associated with 'calm', 'beauty', and 'peace' are, on a rough calculation, around four times more likely to appear in these two short chapters than anywhere else in the novel.^{vi} The dead body, which has traditionally figured as a taboo object linked with fear, superstition and abjection, is itself subjected to aesthetic recuperation, as Dickens reassures his readers that

the hardships Nell has suffered are not legible on her corpse, which wears upon its face a ‘mild lovely look,’ is ‘fair to look upon’, and speaks not only of a ‘tranquil beauty’ but of ‘profound repose’, and ‘peace and perfect happiness’. When her death is eventually recounted, we learn that it was accompanied with ‘a lovely smile...such, they said, as they had never seen, and never could forget’ (537-9). Dickens overloads this section of the novel with the language of rest and repose, a choice which, when combined with his instructions for Cattermole’s illustration, shows his determination to present his readers with a post-death scene from which all fear, anxiety, doubt, or pain have been excluded.

This approach has repeatedly been condemned by critics who object to its mawkishness, and the exclusion of realist detail about death’s disruptive impact on both the dying self and the mourning other. Gill Ballinger condemns Nell’s death for what she sees as its [‘s]trained prose’, and Dickens’s ‘turgid and preacherly writing’ which, she worries, ‘makes little headway among contemporary readers, who tend to deplore such obvious pathos’ (Ballinger 331). Marcia Muelder Eaton describes it as an example of ‘Dickens... at his worst’, thanks to his deployment of ‘clichés and stock metaphors’ when recounting Nell’s final days. It is an ‘unrealistic picture’, she rightly points out, because death and dying are not ‘like this’ (Eaton 124). Yet this is to ignore the associationist psychology that underpins Dickens’s representative strategy, and which Dickens seeks to exploit in his death scenes. As he makes clear in his Edinburgh speech, his depiction of death was determined by its varying potential psychological impact on readers:

If I have put into my book anything which can fill the young mind with better thoughts of death, or soften the grief of older hearts; if I have written one word which could afford pleasure or consolation to old or young in time of trial, I shall consider it as something achieved—something which I shall be glad to look back upon in after life (Dickens ‘Banquet’, 10).

Dickens suggests that his older readers are susceptible only in the heart, the seat of the emotions, and that one of his tasks was to ‘soften’ the grief that he locates there. Accounts of such austere-seeming Victorian readers as Lord Jeffrey, John Forster, and William Macready, reduced to tears upon reading Nell’s death, testify to Dickens’s success on this score.

Younger readers, however, are vulnerable in the mind, rather than the heart, which shows Dickens’s awareness that his sentimental mode had both an emotional and a psychological function.

Recent scholarship on sentimentalism has successfully reconsidered its emotional purpose, but has overlooked its imbrication with Dickens’s associationist psychological beliefs. In an influential recuperation of Dickens’s sentimental mode, Nicola Bown argues that the ‘power’ of Nell’s death ‘lies in its ability to make us feel, and if it does not do that, it is not doing what Dickens has set out to do. He wanted to make his readers cry’ (Bown, p.None). While Bown’s point is well-made it only describes half of what Dickens ‘set out to do’ in his account of Nell’s death; he also wanted to transform how younger readers think about mortality by swapping ‘better thoughts of death’ for worse ones. Dickens would later reiterate this distinction between the responses of old and young minds to the dead in another of his *Uncommercial Traveller* articles, when describing the effect of seeing a corpse displayed in the Paris morgue. The sight of the dead man subsequently ‘haunted’ him, appearing while he bathed in the Seine, walked through the streets, window-shopped in the Palais Royal, and sat at the theatre. Dickens speculates on the psychological lessons that might be learned from this encounter with the dead:

The experience may be worth considering by some who have the care of children. It would be difficult to overstate the intensity and accuracy of an intelligent child’s observation. At that impressible time of life, it must sometimes produce a fixed impression. If the

fixed impression be of an object terrible to the child, it will be (for want of reasoning upon) inseparable from great fear. Force the child at such a time, be Spartan with it, send it into the dark against its will, leave it in a lonely bedroom against its will, and you had better murder it ('Travelling Abroad' 91).

Young minds are again depicted here as 'impressionable', particularly to encounters with mortality. Make death 'terrible' to a child, Dickens suggests, and you will spoil its mind for life. The worse thoughts that Dickens wants to replace must thus have been formed by the negligence of adults, who have either metaphorically, or literally, sent children 'into the dark against [their] will' by exposing them to horrifying representations of mortality.

Dickens's belief in the reforming effect of gentle representations of death registers in the influence that Nicholas's stories have on Smike. "I am not afraid to die", he tells Nicholas, after his exposure to the churchyard and its benign associations to the past: "I almost think that if I could rise from this bed quite well, I would not wish to do so now" (716). He suffers 'little pain, little uneasiness' in his final hours, and dies very peacefully on 'a fine, mild autumn day, when all was tranquil and at peace' after having 'pleasant, happy dreams' (715-6). These beneficial effects work on Nicholas, too, who claims that observing Smike's death has made a profound 'impression' on his mind. Like Dickens, Nicholas describes his encounter with grief as an improving process, which fosters in him a desire to treat those around him with greater consideration: 'the scene through which I have just passed has taught me to reflect and awakened me to a more careful and anxious sense of duty' (744). This 'duty' is secular rather than spiritual, and determines him to act towards others in a more honourable, and less selfish, manner.

Dickens shows how the beneficial effects of stripping death from horror spiral outwards, from the graveyard to the wider social realm, as the sort of moral lessons and

moral progress envisioned by burial reformers begin to take hold. Strang's argument that a 'garden cemetery [is] not only beneficial to public morals [and] to the improvement of manners, but [is] likewise calculated to extend virtuous and generous feelings' was typical of the moral and psychological claims that were made for the reformatory potential of garden cemeteries (Strang *Necropolis*, 58). Dickens wrote the death scenes of both Smike and Little Nell to perform a similar task: to be garlands rather than horrors, believing that they could serve as necessary correctives to a culture that had persistently represented death as horrific. His omission of realist detail from his description of their deaths was not the result of oversight, nor a failure of technique, nor a function of a market-driven literary timidity. It resulted instead from his engagement with contemporary psychological theories based upon the association of ideas, and sprang from an anxiety – widely shared amongst his peers in the 1830s and 1840s – concerning what he believed to be the damaging effects of texts which figured death as terrifying or horrific. Yet the associationist beliefs which led Dickens to this conclusion also convinced him that the opposite was true, and that representations of death could prove to be educative, improving, psychologically and morally beneficial. It was an attempt to engender this education in others that led Dickens to write about death in such an aesthetically distinctive way, eschewing the rhetoric of horror in favour of death scenes that strained towards generating a beneficial response in their readers, and thereby allowing theoretical psychological speculation to determine both his aesthetics of death and, for later generations, his literary reputation.

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ⁱ Dickens may have absorbed Blair's phrase from Washington Irving's 'Rural Funerals', which notes how both poets and rural communities had sought to associate the dead with floral tributes in order to 'soften the horrors of the tomb' (113). Dickens described his long and intimate familiarity with this text in an 1842 speech in New York: 'I don't go upstairs to bed two nights out of seven [...] without taking Washington Irving under my arm upstairs to bed with me' ('Banquet in His Honour: New York', 29). It no doubt influenced Dickens's fondness for rural burial grounds.

ⁱⁱ For more on garden cemeteries see Hotz 28-34; Rugg 43-47.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dickens used variants of this epitaph to describe not just Little Nell but also Rose Maylie, in *Oliver Twist*, and Florence Dombey in *Dombey and Son*.

^{iv} Walker's *Gatherings from Graveyards* was published in late 1839, at around the same time as the final instalment of *Nickleby*.

^v As John Carey, among others, have noted, the interplay of living with dead in this scene is indebted to Wordsworth, and particularly to his poem 'We Are Seven' (135-6).

^{vi} A search found 116 instances of the terms calm, calmly, beauty, beautiful, peace, and peaceful in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. 11 of these occurrences appear in the 14 pages of chapters 72 and 73, giving a frequency of one every 1.2 pages. If randomly distributed among the novel's 548 pages, however, then we should expect to find one appearance of a word from this group roughly every 4.7 pages.